

Our Love of John T. Scott
Pre-visiting materials



John Scott at work

Exhibit Concept:

This exhibit focuses on the many influences present in John T. Scott's artwork. During his career, he amassed various accolades including several honorary degrees and most notably the MacArthur Fellowship grant in 1992. He has been honored with two retrospectives, one in 2005 and one posthumously in 2007. The California African American Museum takes a look at Scott's work through the eyes of various artists and friends. *Our Love of John T. Scott* is the first major Los Angeles exhibition for the artist. Works included are kinetic sculptures, paintings, prints, calligraphic pieces and oversized woodblocks collected by some of his closest friends, relatives and collaborators who joined forces to present this very personal, loving posthumous tribute.

Goals:

To introduce John T. Scott's artistic influences and art techniques

Objectives:

- To provide content about the artist's life in relation to his artwork
- To present some of the major themes in the artist's work
- To define various artistic techniques employed by the artist

New Orleans

John T. Scott was known as a Renaissance man, proficient in a wide variety of media including printmaking, painting, drawing, and sculpture. Though eluding any one definition as an artist, often described as working in the "figurative, abstract or expressionistic," the artist's work is tied together by two major undercurrents "visual critiques and/or commemorations within an **improvisatory** mode." (*Circle Dance: The Art of John T. Scott* Teachers Manual NOMA, 2005). It is this aesthetic and approach to his work that originated in his youth.

John T. Scott grew up in the Gentilly and 9th Ward sections of New Orleans. As a child object-making was both a practical and creative outlet. Having been taught how to embroider by his mother and basic carpentry by his father, Scott's art education began at home. His attitude and aesthetic towards art making would be influenced by the notion that if he didn't have something, he could make it.

In 1965, Scott attended Xavier University in Louisiana. The historically Black and Catholic university provided an early visual language for the artist. His art education ultimately culminated with a graduate degree from Michigan State University in 1965. That same year he was asked to teach at his alma mater and continued to do so up until the time of his death in 2005.

Among works that featured Christian iconography is "The Last Supper" n.d. The painting stylistically is in line with expressionistic artwork of the time. While a painter, Scott began employing various printmaking techniques in the 1960s including **linocut**, **aquatint**, **xylograph**, **serigraph**, **etching**, **silkscreen**, **batik**, and **monotype** to continue to make religious artworks that often feature or make reference to the body of Jesus Christ.

It is around 1970 that Scott begins to work with collographs. Collography is a printmaking technique in which objects with textured surfaces are used to make collage that serves as the printing plate. Once the plate is ready, paint is applied to the surface and paper is applied and pressed onto the surface of the plate. The collographs on display depict the female form. Scott's use of bright colors sharply contrasts with the limited palette afforded by the use of other printmaking techniques.



"Ethiopian Graffiti #3" n.d.

Collography to Sculpture

It is perhaps this foray into collography that inspired Scott to create sculpture. Sculpture requires movement from the viewer, an engagement that is both physical and mental. Scott's early sculpture uses **architectonic** forms. Themes these works dealt with were social in nature. For example in his "Ritual of Oppression" series, Scott uses wood and bronze to evoke the great monuments of ancient Egyptian architecture. These small pylons and pyramids are used to honor the oppressed.



"Ritual of Oppression #7" 1976

Scott's "Third World Banquet" featuring **patinated** bronze dinnerware on top of a 3 legged table creating a **tableau** void of food. Plates and cutlery are bent out of shape and covered in nails, spikes, and rosebush branches while a handful of apples have butter knives stuck inside them. The apple as forbidden fruit symbolizes both knowledge and sin. In this piece Scott is showing us the violence of poverty in contrast with the materialism of industrialized nations.



“Third World Banquet” 1998

In 1984, Scott participated in the Louisiana World Exposition by co-creating an installation called “I’ve Known Rivers” as an **homage** to African-American art, history, and culture. In 1996, he would again revisit history with the creation of a series of works entitled “I Remember Birmingham”. Among these works was a series of glass block sculptures that incorporate **calligraphic** elements, commemorating the bombings at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL on September 15, 1963 where four little girls lost their lives. Text is carved onto almost every surface and painted giving it a quality reminiscent to stained glass windows. The text reminds one of illuminated manuscripts. Some phrases are easy to read while most text is obscured by the overlapping.

The technique used to create the glass block sculptures is called Heliorelief, the process developed at Graphicstudio at the University of South Florida in Tampa. The precision of the calligraphy was achieved by first writing on Mylar sheets and transferring the images to blocks coated with photosensitive film that when exposed to light, burns the text onto the block. These are then sandblasted to create an etched effect (“I Remember Birmingham” tampabay.com, Lennie Bennett, Oct. 16, 2005)



“I Remember Birmingham #6” 1997

Kinetic Sculpture

In 1983, Scott participated in a 6-week residency with acclaimed **kinetic** artist George Rickey. It was this experience that inspired the artist to create pieces that incorporate movement into his sculpture. Still relying on a visual language that employed architectonic forms, Scott begins to bisect these and use their outlines to give his works the capacity for subtle movement. Increasingly, these kinetic pieces would refer to music.

A recurring shape that Scott incorporates into his work is that of the “diddlie bow.” Having done research for his participation in “I’ve Known Rivers,” Scott came across an African hunting ritual that paid tribute to a slain animal but turning around a hunting bow and playing it as an instrument. For Scott this would be both a reference to his African heritage and to the music of New Orleans.



Kinetic sculpture featuring “diddlie bow”

MacArthur Grant

1992 proves to be significant for Scott. He is awarded the MacArthur Fellowship Grant. This enables him to expand his studio space and work on larger pieces. Around this time, he also begins to work with aluminum and on site-specific **public art**. “Spiritgates” (aluminum, 1994) installed at the New Orleans Museum of Art pays homage to the architecture of New Orleans and reference the ubiquitous wooden shutters and iron gates seen on many houses.



John Scott in front of “Spiritgates” 1994

Other notable public art installations are “Spirit House” created in collaboration with fellow artist Martin Payton and Medard H. Nelson and St. Leo the Great schools. Scott met with the children to teach them about the cultural history of New Orleans. They collectively honor the everyday people that figurative and literally had a hand building the city. Once again, music is featured in this piece.

Hurricane Katrina

Later in life Scott returns to printmaking, this time opting to work on a much larger scale creating woodcuts carved out of plywood. The subjects of his prints are the people and places of New Orleans from mundane storefronts to the jazz great Louis Armstrong. Some of these works would later be looked at as **prescient**. Created between 2002-2003, some appear to foreshadow the aftermath of hurricane Katrina which hit just a month after Scott’s retrospective in 2005.

The hurricane would devastate his studio destroying some of his works. Some of his artwork would go missing due to looting. A lifelong resident of New Orleans, Scott would move to Huston that year. In 2007, after two double-lung transplants, Scott passed away at the age of 67.



“The Smile” 2002-2003

Glossary

Aquatint: An intaglio, etching, and tonal printing process in which a porous ground allows acid to penetrate to form a network of small dots in the plate, as well as the prints made by this process. Aquatints often resemble wash drawings. Any pure whites are stopped out entirely before etching begins, then the palest tints are bitten and stopped out, and so on as in etching. This process is repeated 20 to 30 times until the darkest tones (deepest recesses in the plate) are reached.

Architectonic: Architectural qualities, as observed in subjects which are not typically architectural ones.

Batik: a fabric printed by an Indonesian method of hand-printing textiles by coating with wax the parts not to be dyed; *also* : the method itself ¹

Calligraphic: artistic, stylized, or elegant handwriting or lettering ¹

Etching: An intaglio printing process in which an etching needle is used to draw into a wax ground applied over a metal plate. The plate is then submerged in a series of acid baths, each biting into the metal surface only where unprotected by the ground. The ground is removed, ink is forced into the etched depressions, the unetched surfaces wiped, and an impression is printed. Also, both the design etched on a plate and an impression made from an etched plate. Too often confused with engraving.

Homage: Special acknowledgment or respect shown or expressed publicly to persons whose influence an artist wishes to honor.

Improvisatory: to make or fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand ¹

Kinetic: Expressing movement. In art, kinetic refers to sculpture that moves, such as a mobile

Linocut: A linoleum block or plate used for making relief prints. Linoleum is a durable, washable material formerly used more for flooring as vinyl flooring is used today. It is usually backed with burlap or canvas, and may be purchased adhered to a wooden block. The linoleum can be cut in much the same way woodcuts are produced, however its surface is softer and without grain.

Monotype: A one-of-a-kind print made by painting on a smooth metal, glass or stone plate and then printing on paper. The pressure of printing creates a texture not possible when painting directly on paper. Not to be confused with a monoprint.

Patinated: A sheen or coloration on any surface, either unintended and produced by age or intended and produced by simulation or stimulation, which signifies the object's age; also called *aerugo*, *aes ustum*, and *verdigris*. Typically a thin layer of greens (sometimes reds or blues),

usually basic copper sulfate, that forms on copper or copper alloys, such as bronze, as a result of oxidation and corrosion.

Prescient: foreknowledge of events ¹

Public art: Artworks that are designed specifically for, or placed in areas physically accessible to the general public. The meanings and functions of these works varies widely, based on the societal and aesthetic values of the communities, institutions, and individuals which commission them.

Serigraph: A stencil method of printmaking in which an image is imposed on a screen of silk or other fine mesh, with blank areas coated with an impermeable substance, and ink is forced through the mesh onto the printing surface. Also called silkscreen process and screen-printing. A serigraph is a print made by this method.

Silkscreen: A stencil process of printmaking in which an image is imposed on a screen of silk or other fine mesh, with blank areas coated with an impermeable substance, and ink is forced through the mesh onto the printing surface. Also called serigraphy and screen-printing. Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg used silkscreens as a means of applying paint to canvases. Also, a print made by this method, sometimes called a screenprint.

Tableau: striking or artistic grouping ¹

Xylograph: A printing technique that involves carving text in relief upon a wooden block, which is then inked and an impression made on paper. "Xylography" combines "xylo-," meaning "wood," and "-graphy," which denotes writing in a specified manner. "Xylography" didn't appear in print in English until 1816, but it is linked to printing practices that are much older.

Bibliography

Circle Dance: The Art of John T. Scott Teachers Manual produced by the New Orleans Museum of Art

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>
All other definitions from <http://www.artlex.com/>